

Hello Paul

Thank you for your response. Unfortunately, whilst your general sympathies are appreciated, the content of your response does not seem to take us in any way further forward in achieving a resolution – rather it appears to ‘kick the ball in to touch’ to use a rugby parlance.

A quick correction – you refer to ‘your Trust’. The Trust raised circa £130k to fight the appeal and prevent building of flats on Udney Park where there were previously playing fields. I am not a member of the Trust – although I sympathise with many of their sentiments. I wrote to you on behalf of the Udney Park Community Fields Foundation.

In writing to you I had the support of a range of individuals and local sports clubs who endorsed my message. I attach a link to a copy of my original letter with additional signatories who missed the original deadline.

<https://www.udneypark.co.uk/media/ecebi01f/4148-8837-8681-v-1-udney-joint-letter-lbrut-cpo-220615-final-002-003.pdf>

I have a number of points in reply to your letter.

1. You refer to the ‘alleged dereliction of this property’ and the fact that ‘the extent of disrepair is not agreed by the owners’. This is surely not open to debate as the deterioration of the site can be seen by everyone. Which of my four specific points do you disagree with - two thirds of the playing fields are covered in knee high thistles and overgrown grass; below this is somewhere the original cricket square – now in such a state that it would need to be dug up and re-built if ever to be put in use again; the tree roots forcing up the surface of the third tennis court are not a matter of fantasy; the vandalism, and damage to the roof of the war memorial pavilion are evident from even a cursory inspection. I assume that when you meet AHH you will challenge the ludicrous assertion that the site is not in a state of disrepair?
2. The use of the site has been limited to night time training by a rugby club who already have a home, and tennis on two of the courts that remain safe to play on. This is a fraction of the potential that the playing fields could afford if properly managed and opened up to community use, as they were before they fell in to the ownership of AHH. This is exactly the sort of restricted use envisaged by the original AHH proposal that was rejected at the planning appeal.
3. I did not ask for an immediate CPO, but for the council to set out on a path to bring the fields back in to use by community clubs. The first step was to encourage the owners to take their custodianship of this site seriously and implement necessary restoration works and a maintenance regime. Only if they refused to do so, did I suggest a CPO needed to be considered. Are you prepared to take this first step? It appears not.

4. You state that for a CPO to be considered the local authority need to have a 'clear idea how it proposes to use the land and that all necessary resources are likely to be available to achieve such scheme within a reasonable time-scale'. That clear idea is already in the public domain and set out in the business plan of the Foundation. This is not a well-meaning but vague suggestion without substance, but rather a professionally presented proposal supported by Sports England and the National Sporting Bodies, and with financial backing. Have you read this plan and do you see any gaps? If so I can provide any further particulars that you may require.
5. The suggestion that the site has a development value is easily refuted. Even the Savills sales literature limited this development potential to an existing groundsman's flat above the pavilion and the possible building on the existing car park area which sits outside of LGS. Not a single meaningful bidder has come forward over the 13 to 14 months since the sales campaign was launched. This in itself demonstrates that developers see this site has having zero potential. The only thing that will provide encouragement that there is development value is by sending positive signals to the one and only bidder that has apparently got as far as a Pre-App.
6. When I met with LBRUT planning officers – Simon Graham-Smith and Robert Angus – they were adamant that any development of the existing car park or the flat above the pavilion were non-starters as these were intrinsic parts of the community sports facility. This position was mirrored by local elected representatives. Despite this you now state that contrary to this position – 'discussions are still taking place with the Council's Planning Department with a view to negotiating an acceptable scheme for the land and which, if successful, is likely to secure some degree of public benefit'. This is ludicrous. If the council are in fact opening the door to an 'acceptable scheme' then surely this should have been indicated to the Foundation so that we could have been part of the solution. Instead my hands have been tied by the constant messaging of 'not one blade of grass'. This is certainly not a 'continuation' of the messages previously given but rather a complete departure from what council officers have previously been stating. If the planners were prepared to compromise then this prospect could have been explored a year ago, during the ACV period when the Foundation was the only qualifying CIC with funding.
7. It is simply not the truth to suggest that you have had to 'continuously engage' with the Foundation over this topic. Maybe other bodies have demanded your attention on this subject. I can only speak for the Foundation and state that there has been minimum communication between us - we have never spoken and I have never been afforded a meeting with you. I have barely 'put pen to paper' in communicating with you or other council officers - yet the implication is that I am some sort of pest for raising this issue. Setting a six month period before you give this matter any further thought is not acceptable.

Suffice to say I am fed up with the whole process and all the mixed messages. Rather than yo-yo emails could I suggest a meeting that involves both the current owners, the council, and the Foundation so that a solution can hopefully be found. I would further suggest that

our local MP, Munira Wilson, who has raised the issue of Udney Park in Parliament, be asked to attend this meeting in order to facilitate the breaking of the current impasse. Please tell me if this proposal would be acceptable. This cannot wait for your proposed 'six month moment'. In mid -August we enter another ACV period and now is the time to bring this to a head and try to find a solution.

What would not be acceptable to me (and I suspect many other signatories to my original letter) is for a deal to be done in a darkened room by unelected council officers without any community involvement or input. Every local party included returning Udney Park playing fields to community use as part of their local election manifesto. This was a particular cornerstone of the LD campaign. It is not the role of council officers to override the demands of the locally elected representatives – who I would hope will now stand by their promises at the ballot box.

I await your response in respect of the proposed meeting.

Regards

Jonathan

PS written myself without legal advice – I will leave that to others